

Mental Health in Older Adults

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 20% of Americans age 55 or older experience a mental health concern. Older adults are also more likely to experience significant financial, physical, cognitive and social losses. These losses may contribute to a loss of independence for the person.

Discussions about emotions and mental health and check-ins with older adults who have recently experienced a significant loss are important. Listen to them. Offer encouraging responses such as, “That sounds difficult,” or “It sounds like you are going through a challenging time.” These will help more than offering advice or dismissing feelings.

Understanding Risk Factors and Warning Signs for Suicide

According to the CDC, older adults in Texas have higher rates of suicide than any other age group. People 75 years of age and older die at a rate of 18.1 per 100,000 compared to the overall state suicide rate of 13.4 per 100,000. Knowing risk factors and warning signs may help identify when someone may be having thoughts of suicide.

Risk factors are characteristics or conditions that can increase the chance someone may attempt suicide.



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These risk factors tend to be chronic in nature and/or unchangeable:

- **Chronic pain**
- **Death of a loved one**
- **Lack of social support**
- **Loss of independence**
- **A mental health diagnosis**
- **Cognitive impairment**
- **Lack of adequate health or behavioral health care**

Warning signs are indicators a person may be in immediate danger and urgently needs help. These warning signs may be more time-limited or changeable:

- **Writing or talking about suicide**
- **Losing a sense of purpose**
- **Feeling hopeless**
- **Feeling like a burden to others**

When it is a Crisis

If it appears someone may be having thoughts of suicide, it is important to ask clearly and directly. Questions need to be as direct as, “Are you having thoughts of suicide?” It is a very difficult question, but do not worry about asking it. The question does not put the thought into their head. Rather, it shows them how much you care for them.

Do not leave a person alone if they acknowledge thoughts of suicide. It is important to connect them to help and support. **Call the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.** You will be connected to a trained person who can provide resources in your area.

If the person is in imminent danger, if they are trying to harm themselves or have already made a suicide attempt, call 9-1-1 for immediate action.

Special Considerations for Older Adult Suicide Prevention

- Older adults may not be as comfortable with technology as younger adults. This is especially important when referring them to treatment, which may be telehealth-based, or require participation in online social supports. Have conversations with

the person to make sure they are comfortable with technology and explore other options if they are not.

- Many older adults have access to several medications. When concerned about an older adult’s safety, consider ways to safely plan around access to medication, such as a weekly medication pillbox.
- When an older adult experiences a loss due to a physical or mental health diagnosis, death of a loved one, or other significant event, it is important to follow up and provide support. This can be a high-risk time.

Resources

- **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**, 24/7/365. Press “1” for Veterans, Press “2” for Spanish
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text TX to **741-741**
- **County Services Search Page:** texasahhs.org/countyservicessearchpage
- **The Suicide Prevention** wallet card:
English: texasahhs.org/preventionwalletcard
Spanish: texasahhs.org/prevenciondelsuicidio

